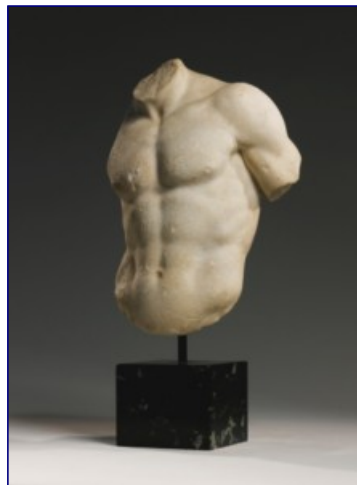




Surviving Gay ...Barely

May 12th, 2017 | josephsciambra.com



Marble Torso of a God or Athlete, Roman Imperial, circa 1st/2nd Century A.D.

In 1989, I walked into the world famous Castro District of San Francisco as a disaffected young man of almost nineteen years of age. I had grown up bullied and lonely, and I was looking to finally belong. Almost since I was a child nearing adolescence, the other boys at school instinctively rejected me. While they made the decisive testosterone fueled jump to more masculine pursuits, such as aggressive schoolyard play and sports, I was timid and unsure. While their voices deepened and sounded

increasingly confident, mine remained high-pitched but strangely muted. While they grew taller and filled-out, I just became thinner and ganglier. The pre-macho boys were typically the best at playing kick-ball and inevitably turn out to be recess and PE team captains. Focusing on my embarrassing apparent lack of skill, they were always quick to ridicule and loudly point out my utter worthlessness. No one ever wanted me on their team. After even the smaller girls got picked, I was always the default last man standing.

There were a few other unathletic boys in my class, either overweight or exceedingly short, who also got similarly passed-over. But they could turn rejection into an advantage through comical self-deprecation or by poking fun at me or someone else. I couldn't do that. I tended to take everything to heart. I froze at the merest slight. The often cruel unthinking banter of boys seemed deliberately vicious. Yet, the more they rejected and taunted me, the more I wanted to belong. My childhood fantasies began to center around a benevolent superhero who would adopt me as his sidekick. In the afternoon, I would rush home to see after-school reruns of "Batman" and imagine myself as Burt Ward. To this day, it's highly significant that homoerotic fantasies about Batman and Robin are pervasive in gay male culture.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I was still tall, thin, and uncoordinated, but I quickly discovered that men wanted to be with me. Here, a boyish stick frame was a distinct advantage. That first night, as I crept into my first gay bar, I was the same insecure and desperately shy kid. I didn't know what to do. My only experience with the world of male-on-male sexuality was through watching gay porn. And, in those images I was fascinated. There was a fundamental order and a ritual to everything portrayed: old with young, big over small, the experienced and the naive. The mature and supremely masculine always ushered into manhood the fresh-faced and less physically impressive youthful rookies.

From porn, I sort of knew what to expect; I had seen such ominous similarly titled films like: *Daddy Dearest*, *Hurts So Good*, and *Try to Take It*. I imagined my transition to masculinity as an initiation rite. And at the near height of the AIDS crisis, like male youths in tribal cultures, who had to endure some sort of physical torment or trial in order to join the community of men, I was willing to suffer anything in the process; even to die.

With my back to the crowded dance floor, I joined a scattered line of men at the bar. The boy no one wanted on his team became the near favorite. Here, proficiency wasn't a necessity, only budding vigor, stamina, and unquestioning willingness. Unlike during our lost childhood, there were men willing to coach and guide us. I looked to my left and to my right and met the cold hard stares of a few intense looking guys. Some gave off a knowing half smile. I glanced down at my drink. When I looked up they were still watching. A man in a tight thin t-shirt that showed off his pecs like Adam West suddenly asked me to dance. I was the first chosen. On the dance floor, he moved close and put his mouth to my ear. Over the loud music I could slightly make-out a muffled question. In the process, the one-day growth of hair on his chin brushed against my newly shaved face. In that accidental moment, I thrilled in the intimacy.

As a boy, I obsessed upon Sonny Crockett's stubble, the mustache of Magnum PI, and the mere fact that the Six Million Dollar Man had a hairy chest. As a somewhat hairless and unsure initiate, I was immediately drawn to those men who fit my juvenile preconceptions of masculinity. [This duality persists](#) in committed and or married same-sex male couples where oftentimes, but not always, pairings involve a larger man, who conforms to [certain traditional masculine traits](#), and a smaller partner who exhibits more effeminate characteristics. And, yet even in those matches which closely resemble each other, the slightest variations instigates a hierarchical rank, with minor differences in height, muscle mass,

mannerisms, pitch of voice, and aggressiveness determining each person's role. In a sense, it's a return to the masculine pecking orders of the schoolyard. Towards the final years of the 1990s, when bareback sex roared back into popularity, men of lesser masculine attributes spoke of a gay urban legend whereby the infusion of semen from a virile male into a receptive male causes an increase in testosterone levels and secondary sex characteristics such as the growth of boy hair.

As someone new to the scene, the unrelenting subliminal fear is that you will remain in constant boyhood or worse still – permanently lapse into the humiliation of your former sissy persona. In the 1990s, the saddest cases were those men, now well into their 20s, that still sported bowl cuts and bleached blond hair. They starved to remain thin and described themselves as boys in gay-sex-adverts. As they got older, their age-range for a potential “daddy” similarly increased. However, typically almost everyone had a first lover that was older, experienced, and reassuring. In our minds, they are accompanying us into the world of men that we always felt alienated from. And, they apparently accomplished this feat through sex.

According to a [2015 HIV Surveillance Report](#) from the CDC, 88.3% of HIV-negative men practiced anal sex in the last 12 months; the numbers were only slightly higher for HIV-positive men. [Another study](#) found that: 71.8% of MSM had anal sex and 28.2% reported oral sex at last encounter. Most significantly:

Over one-half (52.0%) of [MSM aged 18–24 reported a recent male anal sex partner](#) who was >5 years older...By contrast, only 7.9% of heterosexual men and 10.0% of heterosexual women in this age group reported a recent partner who was >5 years older.

In gay porn, the denouement is always the anal sex act. As an inexperienced eighteen year old, I found the aspirations of gay men to be strikingly similar. For an encounter that did not at least include the possibility of anal intercourse seemed incidental and quick. Anal sex lent male homosexuality a certain amount of intimacy. The possibility of that fusion was unbelievably alluring. But I was petrified by the ever-present likelihood of AIDS, thus I refused to risk my life even though I knew I would remain incomplete until I found the courage to submit. A frustrated boyfriend accepted a sort of second-best when I agreed to a form of frottage through which he would thrust his penis between my closed legs. It was an elaborate form of mutual masturbation. Years later, I would tragically discover that the longed for insertive form of this action was similarly shallow.

Only, fear could not squelch this persistent nagging feeling that something remained invariably incomplete within me. I thought about it, and then one day I calmly walked to the local drug-store. Near the gay mecca of the Castro, it was well-stocked with various over-the-counter laxatives and Fleet enemas. For the next hours, I ate very little and washed down a few ex-lax with plentiful amounts of water. The following morning, I had second thoughts when I took the enema out of the box. With its long pre-lubricated syringe, it looked like a quasi torture device. For a few minutes, I leaned against the bathroom sink with every muscle in my body clenched until I couldn't stand it anymore. Looking back, it was like a ritual cleansing before a ceremony in some pagan temple. I was probing my body to initiate rebirth, except no matter how much I pumped myself full with water and salt, I became like the Dead Sea at Sodom. I floated for awhile, but there was nothing to sustain me. It existed for its own sake.

I was horribly sore the rest of the day. As for the sex, unlike porn it didn't take between twenty and thirty minutes. It was far quicker. And, despite the mythology of the power-bottom, this initiation required endurance, and pain, but also submission. The sensation of purposefully trying to relax the sphincter

muscles, since their proper function relayed on a constant autonomic tension, was incredibly strange. I couldn't do it. In the midst of an attempt, my lover shoved a popper bottle under my nose. I took a hesitant whiff and my heart began to thump out of my chest. The level of intimacy was intense or coldly distant depending upon position and eye-contact. I buried my face in a blanket and then dared to look into the face of the man on top of me. There was nothing reciprocal here. Fundamentally, it was a caricature of the marital act. But I wasn't a woman, and I didn't have a vagina. Nothing about my physiognomy could accommodate a penis; there was no natural lubrication and it hurt until I couldn't feel anything. At times, the experience was stinging and fecal. In our wish to find a route into manhood, we become entrapped in a cruel return to the infantine and to the diaper. Almost two decades after stopping such behavior, the most vicious joke has been on me – as today I am sometimes forced into adult protective undergarments. The boy who wanted to be a man is stuck being a baby.

Harry Potter actor Daniel Radcliffe after shooting his first gay sex scene, in a bio-pic film where he portrayed homosexual San Francisco based beat-poet Allen Ginsberg, [had this to say](#) about his preparation for the role:

*I was talked through it by the director. He would be telling me what I would be feeling in each take. Basically, gay sex, especially for the first time, is really f***ing painful. And [Krokidas] said that he had never seen that portrayed accurately on film before. He wanted it to look like an authentic loss of virginity.”*

John Krokidas, the director of the movie, is a gay man in his early-forties.

Practice didn't make it perfect, and it in no way felt natural. It never got better. The constant preparation and rinsing beforehand made sex seem clinical and almost experimental. For a time, I was tenaciously bisexual and I marveled at the hormonal flow of female sexuality. How they required romance and foreplay, something which gay men tried to do away with as evidenced in the hundreds of makeshift “glory-holes” that had been drilled in public restroom stall walls across San Francisco. With the ultimate in depersonalized no-name, and no-face sex, happening wherever there was an open mouth. For women, the eroticization of the pre-sex process prepared their bodies for possible penetration. No such mechanism was at work in the anus of a man.

One day, I was overly zealous in my cleansing procedures and burned myself with the saline solutions. Friends recommended various home-brew enemas using water and baking soda. Another swore by water and aloe-vera; and the strangest recipe being water and instant coffee. A slightly older confidant who I implicitly trusted took me aside and we had a rather peculiar inversion of the father-son talk. He recommended a good proctologist and described his own trials with ineffective remedies such as various salves; he described in detail the pain he underwent from Vaseline applied to anal fissures.

Even just a once weekly regiment of laxatives and enemas dried out the already thin layer of skin that made up the lower colon. One after another, I caught a series of sexually-transmitted diseases: rectal gonorrhea and then rectal chlamydia. I broke out in a rash. Which, at first, barely alarmed me as sometimes the lubricants I used didn't react well with my sensitive skin. Topical over-the-counter ointments proved useless and the painful blisters and sores appeared to be moving inside. For awhile, I continued to have anal sex. No one seemed to notice my slightly pock-marked behind within the darkened corridors of the San Francisco sex clubs. Only, the pain became intolerable and I visited a local clinic. I was put on a regiment of strong antibiotics. They didn't sit well with my stomach and for a few days I suffered in pain with constant diarrhea.

For awhile, I almost swore off the whole practice of receptive anal sex. However, my skin cleared up and I went back to it. For some reason, I couldn't stop. It was strange – how a man inside of me caused this feeling of fullness only for the body to instinctively reject it. It was almost like popping an XTC pill before a night of trance raves and sex. I could feel the drug spreading throughout my being. For those euphoric hours, I was at one with my inner self, my body, and the universe. Afterwards, mimicking the all-male sex act, I crashed and found that I was still trapped in the same anatomy. Immediately the yearning of my heart returned, and I heeded the call to bring something from outside of myself back in – even if it didn't fit.

Towards the end of the 1990s, I wasn't young or thin anymore and the new boys just arriving in San Francisco were different from those who came before. They were less fearful. For those of my generation who had survived, the technologically thin layer of plastic that separated men from their insertive lovers became as thick as a brick wall. The condom began to represent the last barrier between gay men and their goal of raw masculinity. Almost overnight, I noticed large groups of guys abandoning the once sacred unwritten texts of safe-sex. In those days, everyone seemed to be having bareback sex. By then, I was more reluctant to do so. But I was mesmerized by the deliberate revival of 1970s hedonism. The gay bars and clubs put back into rotation all the classic disco era songs. For the boys who had grown up in that era, idolizing the glistening armpits of The Village People, it was a return to a golden-age of sexual freedom. Now I imagine that brief period of time as something similar to the Arthurian revivalism seen during the ugliness of post-Industrial Revolution England where the Victorians, amidst the factories, poverty, and soot, envisioned a mythical beautiful past of handsome knights in reflective armor. The Impressionists did near the same thing in their escape to the parks and ponds of suburban Paris; where nevertheless there always loomed a smokestack in the distance. For us, somewhere inside Studio 54, was hidden the holy grail of manhood. A return to hardcore sweaty sex was the time-machine in which we would travel back to find the elusive cup from which we would all quench ourselves and finally experience total contentment.

Only the cherished golden vessel of our dreams was another hollow promise. Suddenly, everyone around me was getting sick. Infected with HIV and every other opportunistic pathogen, the virus hit hardest those who were still young enough to begin the sexual quest and to endure the many hardships the journey required, only to become disenchanted and desperate. To this day, a large number of those [“gay” men who acquire the AIDS virus](#) are from the 25-34 age bracket.

The anticipated harmonic convergence that was supposed to take place through skin-to-skin contact didn't materialize. Many of the older men, who had lost husbands and lovers to AIDS during the 1980s, and had already experienced the bathhouse culture which inevitably gave rise to the massacre, partially turned away from the decadence and ensconced themselves in semi-exile on the outskirts of the Castro. They largely constituted the faction which would later push for same-sex marriage. For awhile, I was one of them, and I remained semi-content with a single lover. But male homosexuality was never a monotheistic religion; the gay male community is a pantheon of various shrines housed inside the bars, bathhouses, and now on geosocial networking apps, where thousands of headless torso shots start to look like the marble fragments of ancient Greek and Roman demi-gods. But the gay gods are a polyphony of numerous false deities; each melodiously promising contentment to the worshipper. My live-in lover was an altar I knelt before a few times, but then I wanted to get up and walk away once my prayers for inner realization remained unanswered. The sloppiness of sodomy became overly laborious and tedious – often requiring a vigorous hand-job to finish things off. When the gay gods become incarnate within the body of another man, there is a false sort of communion with blood and no lasting deliverance. This rise

and fall of expectations necessitates a never-ending pilgrimage with no holy sepulcher. Worship quickly becomes half-hearted and stagnated by the disillusionment of familiarity. A sought-after complimentary is oppressively lacking. As a result, physical intimacy was often consigned to mutual masturbation and oral sex. I got tired of picking pubic hairs out of my mouth every evening; our shared special moment of mutual release occurred separately while one had their face buried in the other's crotch. [This tends to be largely pervasive in so-called monogamous gay male couples](#) which early-on gives rise to the notion of "f*ck buddies" or sex partners once the couple agrees to open-up the relationship, while remaining only emotionally exclusive to each other. Occasionally, one partner remains clueless when the other goes to a bathhouse or posts a profile on Grindr. I will never forget a dear friend who was endlessly concerned about my reckless behavior, while he would later die, after only a handful of lovers, when he became infected with HIV via a cheating partner.

The mystery of AIDS has always haunted me, even to this day. It's as if the sperm had nowhere to go and nothing to do, and in their frustration they turned upon those who misused them – delivering disease and death.

After years of intermediate bottoming, I was plagued with bleeding and protruding hemorrhoids. I attempted to treat them with store-bought medications and suppositories. One day, I was to meet some friends for dinner, when, unbeknownst to me, a huge growing oily stain developed on the seat of my pants. Everyone knew what was going on and said nothing, yet it was humiliating. Later, a proctologist recommended their surgical removal. I refused.

The persistent problems with that area of my body made me even more fastidious and that compounded the issue. I treated the rectum as if it were the female sex organ, and, in a sense, it started to behave like one. For instance, smell was always a problem during anal sex, and someone suggested a product like "Spring Rain" from Summer's Eve. It worked for awhile, and then the pain became excruciating. The PH-balance of my rectum was like the green water of an abandoned mosquito infested algae filled swimming pool in Arizona. A related constant preoccupation was the possibility of a so called "accident" during sex. I heard stories retold, invariably delivered in a semi-comical manner, about a lazy bottom who didn't take the necessary precautions. Years later, when I was having condomless sex with a boyfriend, I unexpectedly noticed a terrible burning sensation. I withdrew my penis and discovered that it was covered in fecal matter. I was done for the night.

Repeatedly, I became plagued with a series of anal yeast infections. I always hoped it was something else. Only, to seek medical help once it was almost too late. The pain was unbearable. The relentless itching and scratching made the skin red and enflamed. There was a constant burning secretion that dripped out from my body and further irritated the surrounding tissue. Oftentimes, while the antibiotics had time to work, I wore female maxi-pads on the inside back of my underwear. At first I was ashamed until a friend told me about his lover, a man who I thought the near epitome of brutish manliness. Although currently an exclusive top, as a serious bodybuilder, he had to wear adult diapers to the gym because the exertion caused him to spontaneously defecate.

Yet I remained largely undaunted, only the continual purging of the body through dieting and enemas further irritated the lower digestive tract causing what the proctologist described – as a spastic colon. I repeatedly wavered between severe constipation and painful cramping resulting in near-excruciating dysentery. To aggravate the situation, the intermittent shaving of the anal area made the skin chafed and sustainable to infection. There was a battle taking place between how my body was designed and what I wanted to do with it. I think I knew I was losing. However, I always found solace in friends who were

having similar problems and in the collective exuberance of the gay male community to dance through disaster and disease. We kept getting hit, but you get back up. One of the last songs I heard in a gay club:

My loneliness is killing me (and I)

I must confess, I still believe...

I still expected that, somehow, everything would turn out differently for me. Although I didn't believe in much of an afterlife, when I remembered long dead friends I thought that they were at rest and experiencing a perpetual embrace that tragically alluded them in life. Sometimes, I thought this eternal enfolding comprised the resolution of death. It started to look good to me.

Before going out for the evening, I would begin the cleaning procedure and then take time to purposely sit on the toilet and strain for at least a few minutes. My hemorrhoids became worse. They began to protrude; my rectum prolapsed. As a result, I bled every time I had a bowel movement. I understood that the presence of an open wound within my body left me highly susceptible to HIV transmission. Then, what I couldn't comprehend was that another wound, a largely invisible one that had plagued me since childhood, was responsible for the precarious situation I found myself. But at this point, I had been intermittently sick for so long, I was convinced I had already become positive.

From then onward, I joined the ranks of the fearless, the lonely and the inebriated, the supposedly negative bug-chasers, and those who were already infected. In these groups, the pretense of safe-sex was either totally absent or the atmosphere too agitated and hot for anyone to stop the action and rip open a condom packet. For the most part, the inhabitants of this world were serious about their sexual fantasies. The majority, like me, were men that had gone down every other path on the yellow-brick-road. We never found the magical dispenser of manly courage in the Emerald City. We couldn't go home, so we railed against our brokenness and sought healing amongst ourselves.

If the all-important use of a condom during anal sex easily got lost in the euphoria of sex, so did the recommended application of the correct lubricant. Depending upon the location and situation, many gay men resorted to their own [saliva as an aid in penetration](#). With friction, saliva became dry and sticky and the digestive enzymes in spit felt as if they were eating away at the thin layer of skin in the anus. In addition, sometimes the beforehand practice of anilingus predisposes gay men to certain parasitic infections and a chronic diarrheal disease called [shigella](#). For awhile, I was unknowingly infected with a chlamydia infection of the throat – my only symptoms a low fever and a sore throat that I thought was a persistent lingering cold. After that, I contracted a horrible case of oral thrush and the pain was severe. It felt as if my tonsils were being continually baked in the back of my neck.

The most fanatical devotees were those who imagined becoming infected with HIV by a positive “gift-giver.” The utter impossibility of impregnation through gay sex left a subconscious feeling of lifelessness within all those involved. The replacement was the infusion of a charged particle within semen that could potentially penetrate the membrane of every cell. Subsequently, forever changing the recipient. This was the strange outcome of the less benign version whereby, as a young man, I attempted to reach totality through sex with other men. It never happened. Disappointed, there is a hapless quest for deeper meaning in gay sex or a further exploration of the extreme possibilities.

At the beginning of the AIDS crisis, landmark gay-journalist Randy Shilts predicted a kind of runaway green-house effect in the gay world caused by the missing moderating influence of women, and an over

abundance of testosterone, which would create conditions rife for uncontrollable promiscuity resulting in the incineration of everyone involved:

...you had a gay male subculture in which there was nothing to moderate the utterly male values that were being adulated more religiously than any macho heterosexual could imagine, right down to the cold, hard stares of the bathhouse attendants. Promiscuity was rampant because in an all-male subculture there was nobody to say 'no' – no moderating role like that a woman plays in the heterosexual milieu. Some heterosexual males privately confided that they were enthralled with the idea of the immediate, available, even anonymous, sex a bathhouse offered, if they could only find women who would agree. Gay men, of course, agreed, quite frequently.

In 1989, Shilts supported a local San Francisco ordinance (Proposition – S) which would have granted certain legal rights to domestic partnerships. Shilts believed that such cultural and social advances could encourage homosexual monogamy and thus lessen the spread of HIV. Yet, in the ultimate irony, Shilts eventually would go into a self-imposed semi-exile, spending the last years of his life among the towering redwoods of Sonoma County near the idyllic gay resort town of Guerneville. About seventy-five miles north of San Francisco, Guerneville is situated near the picturesque Russian River that, in the dry-season, gently flows to the Pacific Ocean. The single main thoroughfare of the town looks like Main Street USA, but in the summer months, every beach, bar and restaurant is jammed packed with furry half-clad revelers as Guerneville is the center of gay “bear” culture.

As a still thin peach-fuzz covered young man barely into his 20s, I went to this bastion of hedonistic masculinity looking for an experience that would surpass in intensity anything I had done before. I attended one woodside cabin party where the hierarchy amongst attendees was quickly apparent. Relinquished to a subservient position, in the heat of those moments, the air was thick with musk and the guttural sounds of deep male voices. Far from being a world of limp pink prissiness, a raw form of masculinity survives solely in gay male culture. Here, it became almost violently Spartan in its severe attempt at male bonding. Swept up in the wave of pheromones, it's difficult to separate oneself from the action and become immediately detached in order to protect mucus membranes from the bodily fluids that were now dripping from the ceiling. For those of us who grew up constantly feeling the chill of male rejection, the welcoming warmth of male bodies is uncontrollably hypnotic. Taking part, all memories of past alienation and indifference were forgotten as if they never happened. Only, once it was over, you walked away sore and alone. Unbeknownst to me, somewhere nearby, Randy Shilts was dying of AIDS.

Some of the guys I met that day, I singularly hooked up with back in San Francisco. Most were partnered with other men. Yet, what they experienced with their husbands and boyfriends, albeit comforting and safe, was far different from the thrill of the “f*ck buddy” or group sex encounter. Because women are absent from gay male sex, the mythic power of procreation is absent. For, even in the barren, the unitive force in the sacramental love between man and woman is ever-present:

But from the beginning of the creation, God made them male and female. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother; and shall cleave to his wife. And they two shall be in one flesh. Therefore now they are not two, but one flesh.

The combustion in heterosexual sex often ignites from the dichotomy between male and female and in how the seemingly incongruous perfectly join and become one. Hard and soft. In sex, oftentimes, biological and traditional gender roles are reasserted. In an age of confusion, within sexual fantasy, the male and female archetype reign supreme; hence, the steadfast straight male obsession with the

exaggeratedly curvy woman from Jayne Mansfield to Kim Kardashian and the popularity of erotic female literature, such as “Fifty Shades of Grey,” featuring a hyper-masculine male who is civilized by a caring woman; the family-friendly variation on the same theme is “Beauty and the Beast.” This harmonious opposition does not naturally occur in gay men therefore an artificial almost hyperbolic type of selection takes over hence the all-encompassing make-or-break question: “Are you a top or a bottom?” Two of the same type are hopelessly irreconcilable. Overlooking from his high place at the corner of the bar, a particular spot where it turned towards the wall and he could directly face the throng, an exceptionally catty friend of mine, who could make Anthony Blanche from “Brideshead Revisited” look sympathetic, would disdainfully point out the anxious looking unhappy gay couples as “two bottoms looking for a top.” Gay novelist and early sexual revolutionary [Edmund White](#) once said:

*Strict roles, I don't necessarily believe in, per se. I'm more inclined if a guy says he's a total bottom. That I believe. If a guy says he's a total top, I never believe that...It's true from a societal perspective. It takes a little bit of courage to be like, “No, I want to get f**ked all the time, that's it.” A guy who's a “total top,” it's like, “Yeah, you just wanna uphold this idea of what masculinity is to you.” Everybody wants to get f**ked. In a look at every single piece of data I could find that gauged it, the vast majority of gay men identify as versatile.*

However, a lessening of the positional stratification takes place with advancing age; whereby former bottoms, with a battered and tired buttock, become tops when they grow older. Only, there is an accompanying disillusionment that precedes this change in sexual position whereby the former receptive male recognizes that masculinity or wholeness was never accomplished in sodomy. Therefore, they take on the role of high-priest rather than supplicant. But they are not true adherents. They are at best semi-convinced heretics who can only maintain their faith structure by initiating others.

One night, that was not unlike many other nights that I experienced, I sat alone in my room watching nothing on television. I couldn't relax. Outside it was late-winter and chilly, but the air inside felt heavy and overpowering. I looked out the window towards the Castro Theater and could just make out the massive rainbow flag waving in the wind. I thought back over ten years, how as a young man I first rounded over the hill on Divisadero and caught my first glimpses of numerous gay men strutting about shirtless and proud. That day was warm and extraordinarily beautiful. The bright colors of the flag stood out like a prism against the crystalline blue cloudless sky. I was immediately shocked. Because at the height of the AIDS crisis, I half-expected that I was about to fall into a horror movie filmed in black and white; that zombies infected with HIV were waiting to prey upon me and devour my flesh. But my options were few. I could take my chances, risk death for a moment of love, or remain alone forever. The latter was unimaginable. Death was preferable to denying my feelings. Pressing my forehead against the cold glass of the window, years afterward, I came full circle.

Without even thinking, I walked into the bathroom and reached under the sink. I usually kept stock of my enema supplies. Only, that day, I had just one left. I sat on the toilet and wept. I didn't know what I was doing, but whatever it was – I didn't want to do it. At that moment, I felt impelled forward and almost unable to determine my own actions. I could hear a voice inside my head saying: You don't have to do this. But my body was remote-controlled.

I walked outside and became immediately submerged in a thick layer of San Francisco fog. That late-afternoon, everything became visible in grainy 13mm black and white. Nothing was Technicolor. I walked past the Castro Theater and looked up at the marquee – Sing-A-Long “The Wizard of Oz.” I turned the corner and headed towards my favorite sex-club.

Back then, I proudly considered myself above such diversions. When I was younger, and not sure what to do, I blindly ventured into these gay sweat lodges. They were part endurance test, new-age detoxification ritual, and basic training camp. I had been through all of that and I didn't need them anymore. So, I thought. But a persistent memory kept haunting me.

I was new to San Francisco and barely broken-in. So far, I had only mingled with other men in the gay vestibules of the bars and discos. Unsatisfied, I wanted to pray in the holy of holies. I picked the sex-club I walked past a hundred times, but never had the guts to go in. The attendant was bald, tattooed, and stone-faced behind a bullet-proof window. I hoped he was a precursor to the manliness found inside. Once I paid the entrance fee and walked through the door, from nowhere in the darkness, an effeminate assistant emerged from a side window. He was chubby and fleshy like a girl. His softness was a revolting and unwelcome mnemonic of boyish baby-fat and premenstrual bloat. In an odd way, he reminded me of the gay male failure to procreate. He was a symbol of chaos. We liked men who looked like men. In gay male culture we required strident rules; even drag queens were only considered admirably successful if they could pass for the opposite sex. He handed me a condom and a plastic ketchup pack of lube. I headed to the locker room – threw in my backpack and proceeded to walk around the place while fully clothed. What was I doing? Everyone else was either naked or sporting a single white towel around the waist. The amorphous helper ran over to me and scolded my ignorance. You can't have clothes on, he instructed. I went back to the locker room and took everything off.

The layout of the club comprised a series of oddly laid-out areas that became progressively darker as one ventured to the back of the building. The décor incorporated every masculine cliché: polished chrome, black vinyl cushions, and murals of bodybuilders. The spaces towards the front were the most elaborate while the ones towards the rear comprised almost empty rooms painted black. At first, I stayed in the bar area which opened up into a rather ingeniously designed shower and sauna. Like the separate locker-room, these were theatrical stages on which gay men subconsciously played-out the trauma of boyhood; where the merciless teasing we endured after PE class by swaggering boys was somehow redeemed in this form of group therapy. Here, for a night, the confusion of childhood almost disappeared. But a similar hierarchy from the schoolyard persisted with the physically impressive remaining in command. Rejection existed, but it was subtle. And everyone, even the sagging and aged could find their match. In a worse case scenario, in the backrooms, there loitered men who only wanted a male body with blood rushing through its veins. Only nothing went deep enough. Like the ridiculously elongated dildos sold in every gay porn shop, nothing could reach inside and touch what was really hurting. I remembered a friend who had an incredible capacity for [fisting](#); he fantasized about the day he could take a man beyond the elbow. This was almost a bizarre reenactment of Aztec human-sacrifice in which the priest reached into the body and pulled out the still beating heart of the hapless victim. Gay sex was a mixture of pleasure and torture. A form of self-flagellation where newly inflicted wounds never healed and older ones tended to be forgotten. And in their desperation, everything becomes a sort of tragic melodrama: men are tied up and tortured like a pornographic role-play impersonating early-Christian martyrdom. Except there is no release from bondage through redemptive suffering. So everyone pushed a little further.

I left the shower-room and proceeded to a large section reserved for weights and various workout benches. Among the barbells and pulleys were suspended from the ceiling several slings made of stainless steel and hard rubber. The gun-metal grey color of the walls was reminiscent of a machine shop or car garage. The place was semi-deserted, but there was a particular odor that was a combination of the sticky moist air from the showers and the musk emanating from the deeper recesses of the club. It was

simultaneously disconcerting and intoxicating, bringing back to the forefront long buried memories of the all-male environs I had been permanently banished from entering. As a chronically uncertain boy, I simultaneously anticipated and dreaded the men's locker-room at the swimming club my family frequented during the summer. My aim was never to simply ogle at a naked man; the delight was just in being with men. That was enough to more than justify the price of admission to the bathhouse or the cover-charge at the gay dance-club. In fact, we were willing to pay anything. I took a deep breathe through my nose and kept moving in a solemn procession, joining a line of men going somewhere.

The next room was almost pitch black. As I was about to enter, a figure rushed towards me and I could only begin to make out his form as he stepped into the dwindling light. He was glistening with moisture, fully naked and red-faced. He sported a still erect member that shined from the sliminess of a just completed sex act. He inadvertently brushed against me and I was smeared with his goo. I was momentarily revolted before I suddenly didn't care. Like the inability to initiate safe-sex practices while raging with hormones, I was being pushed onward by the collective rush of adrenalin and my need to belong...nothing else existed or mattered

That somewhere – was masked in complete darkness. I could only recognize indistinct outlines that looked like human forms. I reached out at something that looked real, but all I touched was emptiness. I tried to refocus my eyes as I walked further into the void. Up ahead, I could faintly see a dimly lit rectangular block bench. Like the floor, it was covered in the same sort of dark material. In the middle of the otherwise empty room was a large silver grate covered drain. The holy of holies turned into a morgue.

Kneeling over the bench were several naked men. I couldn't see their heads or faces; only their upraised backsides. For a few seconds, I stood motionless. This was it. I reached the culmination of my deepest desires. The literal end for every gay man – on their knees, holding apart your butt cheeks, hoping some man will appear. Only, this imagined encounter with the transcendent, with God, finishes like the male sex act – with a deflating dip in androgen levels verging on depression. It leaves everyone wondering.

As a result, gay men unconsciously try to sacramentalize gay sex. And in their desperation, everything becomes a sort of black mass. "Queer" theoretician and historian Michael Bronski once remembered how the pre-AIDS era gay sex clubs of San Francisco became "a church," and to him: "startling and sacred, even holy."

In what is arguably the first great modern gay novel, Andrew Holleran's protagonist from "Dancer from the Dance," describes the often haunting but ultimately pointless nightlife of the homosexual male in 1970s New York City:

It was here I had first seen Rick Hafner glistening with sweat like an idol around which people knelt in a drugged confusion, unconsciously adoring his beauty, assuming the pose of supplicants at some shrine.

In 2013, gay advocate and provocateur Dan Savage, who was raised a Roman Catholic, appeared on "Real Time with Bill Maher. During his conversation with Maher, and some conservative panelists, Savage methodically set out to shock:

I'm always telling people who say two men can't make a baby, anything is possible for God. I'm going to keep inseminating my husband and keep my fingers crossed.

Although incredibly crass and vulgar, not since Randy Shilts exited this world has something so profoundly revelatory been expressed by a gay man about male homosexuality. What Savage

unintentionally exposed was a massive flaw in the gay male experiment: its soul-draining lifelessness. Instead of accepting this truth, there is a dramatic reversal towards what was once regarded as “heterocentric norms.” Even before the Stonewall Riots, gay rights pioneer Carl Wittman, in his revolutionary “[A Gay Manifesto](#),” issued this warning:

Gay people must stop gauging their self-respect by how well they mimic straight marriages. Gay marriages will have the same problems as straight ones except in burlesque.

He added:

We have to define for ourselves a new pluralistic, role-free social structure for ourselves. It must contain both the freedom and physical space for people to live alone, live together for a while, live together for a long time, either as couples or in larger numbers; and the ability to flow easily from one of these states to another as our needs change.

Liberation for gay people is defining for ourselves how and with whom we live, instead of measuring our relationship in comparison to straight ones, with straight values.

Before the cataclysmic trauma of AIDS, what Wittman offered was an honest assessment of gay male sexuality, particularly its predilections and its limitations. Because of the male biological imperative, unfettered from the objections of girlfriends and wives, gay men tend towards multiple partnerships and restlessness hence [the relatively low overall number of gay marriages](#) (9.6%) that only experienced a small bump of 1.7% after the Obergefell decision and [the persistence of HIV infections among men in a presumably stable relationship](#). What Wittman recommended is essentially the reality of gay male partnerships which are not predominantly monogamous, but [negotiated open relationships](#). However, a facade prevails that equates male homosexuality with heterosexuality or even lesbianism. It’s no accident that the initial same-sex marriage activists were either aged rather asexual men or gay women. Their post-male menopausal status and the intense exclusivity of lesbianism, though tending towards emotional volatility, effectively neutralized the images of heated male sexuality that were correctly depicted in the 1970s by the likes of The Village People and the Castro clone. Consequently, the well-scrubbed modern gay icons of Nate Berkus and Neil Patrick Harris are supremely unthreatening.

The raw and seeping tumidity of gay male sexuality has only survived in hardcore bareback (condomless) pornography. Until the late-1990s, condomless anal intercourse was nearly unheard of in gay porn. Then, towards the millennium a San Francisco-based pornographer named Paul Morris resurrected the world of pre-AIDS decadence. Morris once stated in a rare interview: “...for the straight world, much of what comprises queer culture and life is incomprehensible.” Well-aware of the gay sex scene in San Francisco, the architects of the bareback gay porn phenomena reflected the dramatic shift in attitude towards sex among gay men; for they took ordinary guys out of the bathhouses and off the early internet hook-up sites, and made them stars. Ever since, [the percentage of gay men who regularly engage in condomless anal intercourse](#) has continued to increase. The open celebration of unsafe-sex, like the opposite conservative reaction that resulted in the legalization of same-sex marriage, was propelled by memories of the AIDS massacre. Those who wanted to return to the 1970s, were responding to a particular gay media-driven image of the homosexual male that dominated the previous two decades, that is the gay man as the emaciated and noble martyr. But more recently, a new paradigm developed as well as the inexplicable forced melding of gay men into the incongruous LGBT community with an androgynous woman as its undisputed ideal – Ellen DeGeneres.

As someone who came-out at the height of the AIDS crisis in 1988, I experienced a wide arc of gay male history from the depths of the epidemic to the revolutionary introduction of retrovirals and the abandoning of once sacrosanct safe-sex practices. My life, and the lives of gay men who survived that period of time, mirrored the hopes, anxieties, and ultimate failures of that age and the entire gay experiment. For we arrived in San Francisco, New York City, Los Angeles, or anywhere with the same set of expectations: that we would find someone to love and to love us in return. At first, the initially stringent recommendations that included the use of condoms, Nonoxynol-9, and even dental dams seemed like a small price to pay after enduring tormented and turbulent early years during which we struggled with our identity. Immersed in newfound bliss, the gentle sensation of a man's breath against our neck is enough to send us into ecstasy. Later, things change. The thrill is fleeting and less intense. Going to the bar or dance club becomes like looking at the same old porn magazine that you stole from the local liquor-store when you were a kid. The once cherished possession becomes a torment and you throw it out. This plight is currently playing out among all men, gay and straight, who continually dig downward into increasingly sick forms of internet porn.

Fearing that perhaps happiness is slipping away, most men became anxious and their efforts increasingly frantic and indiscriminate. By the end of the 1990s, the once somewhat scared boy of eighteen would do nearly anything. For awhile, exhibitionism was a new all-encompassing diversion; pre-dating social networking apps, I exposed myself during amateur night at a local gay strip club. In an ultimate fail, I slipped onstage after stepping into a puddle of semen and lube left behind by the previous performer. I started having sex in local parks, in parked cars, in portable toilets during gay-pride. On what was to become my final night as a gay man, I was willing to risk everything one last time. My quest for acceptance, love, and manhood remained entirely and hopelessly incomplete. I ended almost exactly where I began; I stood at nearly the same point in space – ten years later. But I was still scared. As for the boy, he never left me. Being gay, and having sex with men, didn't make him into a man. He was still searching and he took me along for the ride. Except my body was breaking down. Early that morning, I would stumble half-dazed from a gay sex-club. I collapsed into the gutter. I vomited blood and the violent stomach contractions caused my colon to completely empty its contents. I reached into my underwear – I was bleeding internally. My life was streaming out from both ends. Where I thought there existed a doorway into the sublime, I had kicked-open the gaping passageway to death. This was my final humiliation. If heaven meant some sort of afterlife and hell was an immediate and everlasting conclusion to this torture, I chose damnation.

And I will pour upon you clean water, and you shall be cleansed from all your filthiness, and I will cleanse you from all your idols. And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you...

I walked into San Francisco, but I had to be carried out. The man who picked me up that dark day was unlike anyone I had ever met. He took my lifeless body back home – to my parent's house. There, I woke up in my old bedroom, surrounded by a few incidental memories from childhood. The same bed I once delighted in my first wet dream, I now soiled with blood.

The following months were dominated by a series of appointments with various physicians, specialists, and surgeons. The embarrassment and pain that I long evaded was unavoidable. Before surgery, I was required to almost mockingly relive every cleansing routine I endlessly practiced.

During the procedure, a section of my rectum was removed due to the existence of severe internal scarring. Like an imprisoned victim of the Marques de Sade, my sphincters had been sewn shut with thick cording. The doctor and nurse gave me a long list of stool softeners and laxatives to take with

copious quantities of water in order to make it possible that I could have a bowel movement through an inconceivably narrow orifice. The precautions didn't work, and I busted the stitches. To stop the bleeding, I stuck a hand towel down my shorts and went to the emergency room. With my back to the waiting room wall, amongst the coughing children and light-headed elderly patients, the blood began to seep through my pants.

For what seemed like hours, I laid on the hard hospital gurney. I rang for the nurse, but the place was a flurry of activity; next to me, separated by a thin privacy screen, were a pair of teenagers: one suffering from an overdose of prescription pills and the other with a severe pelvic infection due to an untreated STD. This was purgatory. I had to use the toilet, so I shuffled across the freshly waxed floors towards the restroom. On the way back to my bed, I left a trail of little red dots behind me. This wasn't an intermediate state between heaven and earth – it was hell. I had died and been sent to suffer an eternity as a character in a perverse fairy-tale – the boy with a broken bottom. To the great consternation of the attending doctor and nurses, I checked myself out of the hospital and went home.

For the next few days, I ate nothing but a grainy powdered fiber substance mixed with water and prune juice. I stood in the shower and defecated on my feet. I couldn't sit, nor strain. More than once, I didn't quite make it to the bathroom from my bed. Only a few feet from the toilet, I slipped and fell on the tile floor made slippery by the mess.

Slowly, my body healed. However, I kept soiling myself. Another surgery would follow; then another. Years later, I remain semi-incontinent. Despite the inconvenience, occasional pain, and embarrassment, I consider myself blessed because I escaped homosexuality relatively unscathed when compared to many of my friends. Some of the scars will remain as long as I am alive, but I can live with them. In a sense, they are a constant reminder of who I was and what God saved me from. Others bear the marks on an indelible scale where the HIV virus hides in every part of their body. But as the years pass by, my health problems are compounded; I feel old. The few friends that survived our previous existence are all similarly plagued. We accompany each other to doctor visits and continually send get well cards and have healing Masses said for one another. Our quest for love came to an end in unrealized dreams, damaged bodies, and the graves of the dead.

In our overwhelming desire to understand the world and ourselves, we were willing to go against Nature and God Himself. We disregarded the fundamentals of physiology and for that violation we paid dearly on an unbelievably devastating collective and individual basis. In the process, we threw our bodies and the surrounding culture into chaos; in a feeble attempt to right ourselves we demanded that society recognize our rebellion. But a law instituted by men hasn't changed our physical structure.

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